

Justice Department To Be Immune From Pressures: Bell

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WASHINGTON — Atty. Gen. Griffin B. Bell has pledged that the Justice Department will be a "neutral zone" in the political system, immune from White House or congressional pressures.

Citing the "unfortunate legacy of Watergate," Bell announced that all future communications from congressmen or White House officials regarding pending cases must be reported to top Justice Department officials.

But even as Bell was announcing his new policy in a meeting yesterday with department lawyers, House Speaker Thomas (Tip) O'Neill (D-Mass.) charged that a three-count Federal perjury indictment returned Tuesday against Rep. Daniel Flood (D-Pa.) was politically motivated.

"These days there are a lot of political indictments in America," O'Neill told reporters when asked about the charges against Flood, the chairman of a key House appropriations subcommittee.

The House speaker said that "a lot of political animals" at the Justice Department allow their own philosophy to take precedence over their judgment in bringing criminal actions against politicians.

When asked about O'Neill's charges later in the day, Bell refused to respond directly, saying he could not comment on pending criminal litigation.

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," he said of the perjury charges against Flood. "We'll have to wait until that trial takes place."

Bell and his top aides put special emphasis on the importance of the new guidelines requiring all "political" contacts with Justice Department lawyers to be screened by the attorney general or his two top deputies.

Bell admitted that the new proce-

dures may seem "unduly restrictive" to officials elsewhere in the Government, but called it "a small price, and a necessary one, for restoring and maintaining public confidence in the Department of Justice."

Bell gave no reasons for announcing his new policy at this time and denied that there had been any improper pressure brought by congressmen or White House officials in any recent investigations.

"The problem is that their positions of power create a potential for unintentional influence upon a decision, or more often, may give rise to the broad appearance of improper influence," the attorney general explained.

Bell and President Carter were stung by criticism of their decision earlier this year to fire U.S. Attorney David W. Marston of Philadelphia at the urging of Rep. Joshua Eilberg (D-Penn.), who at the time was under investigation by Marston's office. Marston is a former Knoxvillian and a graduate of Maryville College.

The new policy is not designed to make the Justice Department immune from outside criticism, Bell said, but rather to screen out "in fact and in appearance" any outside pressure designed to influence the legal decisions of department lawyers.

Bell also promised that any time he or his top deputies overrule the recommendation of their subordinates in an individual case, they will explain their reasons in writing. If possible, those reasons will be made public.

Assistant Atty. Gen. Philip B. Heymann, a former deputy Watergate special prosecutor who recently took over the Justice Department's criminal division applauded Bell's new policy.